

VZCZCXRO3997
OO RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0066 0291438
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 291438Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4580
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0757
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0343

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000066

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR JORDAN; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/28/2018

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIAN GOVERNMENT DETAINEES OPPOSITION LEADER RIAD SEIF

REF: DAMASCUS 0061

Classified By: CDA Todd C. Holmstrom for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) Summary: On the evening of January 28, Syrian authorities detained Riad Seif, Damascus Declaration National Council head and former imprisoned MP. He was arraigned January 29 and is currently in Adraa Prison along with the other 10 National Council detainees. End Summary.

12. (C) At approximately 7:00 PM on January 28, Damascus Declaration National Council Secretariat President, former MP, and political prisoner Riad Seif was unexpectedly detained by the Syrian criminal police after an arrest order issued by the General Prosecutor for Damascus, according to Seif's lawyer, Khalil Matook. On January 29, Seif stood before the investigative judge at the Damascus Criminal Court, where the judge charged Seif with the same set of politically motivated accusations as the other ten National Council detainees (reftel). Matook characterized Seif's responses to the judge's question as resolute and unflinching, at one point making light of his association with the U.S. Embassy.

13. (C) Seif, who is in critical need of overseas treatment for prostate cancer, was then taken to Adraa prison, which is where the other 10 detainees were taken yesterday. Prominent human rights lawyer, and former president and current board member, of the Human Rights Association of Syria (HRAS) Haithem al-Maleh said he expected Seif, as well as the other National Council detainees, to receive approximately five years in prison. Maleh, who represented Seif on previous occasions, admitted that there are many variables in the regime's calculus and the fate of the detainees is yet to be decided.

14. (C) According to Seif's daughter, Jumana, 24-hour security service surveillance of Seif's movements began five days ago. One diplomatic contact with four-plus years in Damascus suggested that the coincidence of the arraignment of the ten NC members with Seif's arrest on the same day indicates that the moves were planned in advance and executed with approval from the top. It also conveys SARG confidence that it can withstand international criticism of these acts, he commented. While Seif's fate still remains uncertain, diplomatic contacts today were betting that Seif and the other 10 National Council members could be in jail for the next five years.

15. (C) According to an EU source, the Germans were working on a statement by Foreign Minister Steinmeier to condemn Seif's arrest, and last week the French had circulated a proposed demarche and public statement through the Slovenian MFA for circulation to other EU capitals. The French were now attempting to update the demarche to take account of the arraignment of the 10 National Council members and the detention of Riad Seif.

16. (C) One theory in circulation is that Seif's arrest may have been a direct SARG warning to the EU. Seif, whose wife is a German citizen, has always had close relations with European embassies and their visiting delegations. According to this theory, the regime may be using Seif as a card it can deal in order to blunt European criticism of its human rights record and policies in Lebanon, such as the sharp comments from Dutch Foreign Minister Verhagen after his January 23 visit to Damascus.

17. (C) That said, SARG authorities appear to be focusing on Seif's ties to the U.S. According to his lawyer, all ten National Council members arraigned on January 28 were forced to sign a declaration that they knew of Seif's and Riad Turk's relations with the United States and that they were working to change the Syrian regime.
HOLMSTROM